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THE FEMININE IDEAL OF CHRISTIANITY.

LUKE I : 49.

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I.

THE history of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is the history of the struggle between two ideals—the masculine and the feminine. It begins with the strife between the woman and the serpent in the primeval dawn, and it ends with the conflict between the woman and the dragon in the Apocalypse. Each age repeats the battle under a new name. Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, the brethren and Joseph, Pharaoh and Moses, Saul and David, Barrabbas and Jesus—all are but the various forms in which the same problem presents itself. Christ's conquest of the world is the conquest of the male by the female element—the seed of the woman bruising the head of the serpent. It is not correct to speak of the elevation of woman as one of the effects produced by Christ. It is not an effect at all; it is the cause of all effects. It is not one change amongst many; it is the root of all the social and moral changes which have marked the transition from the old life into the new. Christianity has given to the world a new ideal of heroism, and that ideal is the woman as distinguished from the man. It is not that she has taken her own place in society; she has taken *my* place in society. When an ideal gets possession of the world, it never occupies part of the world; it rules all round. It must be everywhere, if it is anywhere. It touches the current of all events; it modifies the course of every stream. Its effect is felt from the center to the circumference.

The whole morality of an age depends on whether its ideal be male or female—the bearing down or the bearing up of a burden. Let us take one of the cases which at first sight would seem most remote from the subject—drunkenness. What is

the cause of drunkenness? The immediate answer would be, "the love of drink." And yet it is quite certain that to the individual mind the love of drink is an acquired sense. It is quite certain that, if alcohol were administered to a child medicinally, it would receive it with the aversion it bestows on medicine. But, as childhood passes away, care comes. With youth, it comes in the form of the imagination; with manhood, in the form of pressure. If the ideal of the age be masculine, it will seek to bear down the care at any price. The Roman did not scruple to do it at the price of suicide. Drink is to the Briton what suicide was to the Roman—a mode of getting rid of care, of bearing it down. As long as men and women alike have this male ideal of strength, there will always be the recurrence of this danger. But, suppose there should come a new ideal of strength. Suppose it should break on the consciousness of any age that the highest exhibition of power is not to bear down but to bear up the burden, would not the effect be to diminish the alcoholic tendency? In point of fact, this is the present condition of things in Britain. The practice of inebriety has declined because it has become what is called "bad form." What do we mean by "bad form"? We mean that it is no longer the world's ideal of social dignity, that it has ceased to be the mark of a gentleman. And why has it ceased to be the mark of a gentleman? Simply because there has grown up a new ideal of what it is to be strong. We have awakened to the conviction that strength does not consist in the power to forget our cares, but in the power to remember them and still not die. It is from the mind, and not from the body, that the amelioration of the body has come. The change of physical habit has proceeded from a change of thought; and a vice which seemed to have its root in a merely outward passion has been assuaged by the potency of an inward vision.

The power of Christianity is referred from the very outset to its feminine ideal. In the foreground of the great temple there stands a woman. Amid the decay of old empires, amid the vanishing of faded flowers, amid the disappearance of worn-out forces, she proclaims on the threshold of the gospel her

own enfranchisement: "He that is mighty hath done great things for *me*." Very significantly she adds, "and holy is his name." Wherein lies the significance? Clearly in this, that it shows her exultation to be altogether free from egotism. It is not as an individual that she congratulates herself. It is no sense of private privilege that moves her; it is the glory of the class which she represents. It is not that she is to be the mother of the Messiah; it is rather that the Messiah who is to be born of her is to be himself a feminine power—a power which is to reverse the existing condition of things, to "put down the mighty from their seats and exalt them of low degree." The "low estate of the handmaiden" which God is said to remember is not the estate of a personal unit, but the habitual and long continued degradation of the type of womanhood itself. The hymn of the Virgin is beyond all measure impersonal. It contemplates no individual privilege of her own. It sings the praise of a new era—an era in which the feminine or passive type shall be exalted, and the masculine or crushing force shall be brought down, in which the long repressed line of Abel shall win the preëminence over the line of Cain: "He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away."

Let us open out this subject a little further. "He that is mighty," says the first Christian woman, "hath done great things for *me*." What are these great things? Wherein consists the feminine element of Christianity? Does it lie in the Virgin, or does it lie in Christ? It is really the question between mediævalism and Protestantism. The mediævalist says that the feminine element in the gospel is derived from the Virgin Mary, and he claims, through his reverence for her, to be the special advocate for the rights of woman. The Protestant, on the other hand, denies that the feminine element in the gospel originates with Mary. He claims it for Christ. He says that the origin of the new ideal is the Son of Man himself, that the reverence for woman results from the reverence for Jesus, and that the Virgin herself owes her crown to the reaction effected by the Prophet of Galilee.

Now, which of these two views are we to adopt? Shall we say that the Virgin mother is worthy of reverence because she is the mother of a power beyond the earth; or shall we say that she has received a reflected glory from the humanizing feminine ideal whose spark she has ignited? If we take the first view, there arises one potent consequence; there is no real reverence for the ideal of woman at all. If I revere the Virgin merely for what is above the world, it becomes quite possible to exalt her as an individual without lifting by a hair's-breadth the sex to which she belongs. In point of fact, this has been the course of mediævalism. We see it in its history; we see it in that which mirrors its history — its art. Take, for example, the picture of the last judgment by Andrea Orcagna. Upon a golden throne, surrounded with all the majesty of state, sits the terrible Christ, the judge of the world. The sword of justice is in his hand. His countenance is stern and forbidding, and on its lines is written the verdict of doom. In front of him stands the human race awaiting its sentence. On the right side are the ranks of the redeemed, with a smile of expectancy on their faces. On the left are the sons of perdition, trembling before the coming vengeance. Beside him, on an equal throne, sits the Virgin mother. Her eyes are averted from her stern Son, so as not to see his anger; and, with a pathos of exquisite pity, she is seen to plead for the lost. But to the heart of the terrible Christ she pleads in vain. His hand is raised to his wounded side — that side which once overflowed with a river of sympathy, but is now burning with a fire of indignant wrath; and the lightning flashes from his eye as the sentence comes forth in words of lurid flame: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Now, what is the reason of this picture? There is a very common mistake on this matter. The popular view is that the design of such pictures is to magnify in the Virgin mother the ideal of womanhood. It is the reverse. They originate in the fact that, while the Virgin is exalted, woman is not. Why is it that, in spite of her equal throne, she pleads in vain? Not because Christ is deemed repulsive, but because pity is held to

be a weakness. There is not the faintest suspicion in the mind of the artist that he is derogating from the divine beauty ; there is not the slightest suggestion in the view of the spectator that the character of the Son of Man is being traduced. So far as design is concerned, the sentiment is pious. The artist is giving to God that which he has all along believed to be the most godlike thing in the world. He has painted him in the colors which he has been taught to think the most heroic—white and red, freedom from all blemishes, and hot anger against those who are blemished. To be free from this red heat is not divine. God is the opposite of the feminine. He is unbending strength. The Virgin is out of her element when enthroned beside the Deity. She has the instincts of the race from which she has been taken—pity, softness, tenderness. They are the sources of her intercession, but they are also the marks of her inferiority. She has been elevated to an honor which the spirit of womanhood does not share.

Is there any escape from this travesty? Yes ; but it is right through the way which I have called the opposite of mediæval. It consists in seeing the feminine element of Christianity in Christ himself. In the words, "He that is mighty hath done great things for me," it understands the Virgin mother to be speaking, not as an individual, but as the representative of all womanhood. The handmaiden whose low estate is to be regarded is woman herself—the long oppressed, long obscured, long unappreciated factor of the human race. Was this the view of the evangelist when he wrote the words of the *Magnificat*? I believe it was. I have spoken of the impersonality of the hymn as in favor of this interpretation. But there are two additional and extraneous circumstances which, to my mind, have great force. The first is the reference to the chosen seed of Abraham, Luke 1 : 55. What was that election? It was the choosing of the weak in preference to the strong. It was the passing by of the powerful and crushing strength of Ishmael for the gentle and unobtrusive character of Isaac. It was, in short, the selection of the feminine instead of the masculine type. That the elder should serve the younger was proclaimed as the

divine law for the patriarchal government. It was a law by no means always pleasing to the patriarchs themselves ; Isaac loves Esau, and even Abraham cries, " Oh, that Ishmael might live before Thee ! " None the less, nay, all the more, it is seen to be the determinate counsel of God. The *Magnificat* is but the last bar of an old refrain—a refrain which has been repeated again and again at every winding of the stream of revelation, a refrain whose message is broader than any mere historical announcement, and whose burden is ever the same, " the seed of the woman shall bruise the head of the serpent. "

The second of the grounds on which I hold the impersonality of the *Magnificat* is the existence of a similar document, transcribed in the same circumstances and written by the same hand. I allude to the reference in the opening of the book of Acts to the prophetic hymn of Joel. The book of Acts is meant to be the parallel of the third gospel. If the gospel records the birth of the historic Christ into the world, the Acts records the birth of the Spirit in the soul. If the one is inaugurated by the glory of angels, the other is ushered in by tongues of fire. If the former is proclaimed as the light of the Gentiles, the latter is declared to give one language to mankind. So in like manner, if the first has its *Magnificat*, the second also has its hymn of praise. And what is this hymn of praise ? You will find it in Acts 2 : 17, 18, introduced as the prophecy of the new evangel. And what is that prophecy ? Every clause of it has one and the same meaning—the subordination of the class now exalted and the elevation of the class now depressed. Every sentence is a commentary on the words of the *Magnificat*: " He hath put down the mighty from their seats and hath exalted them which are of low degree. " Let us look at these different clauses.

" I will pour out of my spirit upon all flesh "—no longer on a privileged hierarchy, but on man as man. " Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy "—the receptive members of the household shall take the lead in the new régime. " Your young men shall see visions "—those who used to follow shall become the prophets of the age. " Your old men shall dream dreams "—those who are supposed to be without energy shall be inspired

with the dreams of youth. "Upon servants will I pour out of my spirit." The original from which the words are taken does not say "*my* servants;" it is the depressed class amongst *men* that is spoken of. "Upon handmaidens will I pour out of my spirit." It is a reiteration of the faith of the *Magnificat*. The low estate of her who had hitherto been but the handmaid of man is henceforth to be regarded by the All-Father. Woman is to rise because womanhood has risen. The star which leads to the young child is to lead to the elevation of all childlike things, and the new ideal of heroism is to produce an actual revolution in the order of life.

We arrive, then, at the conclusion that the feminine ideal of Christianity is derived, not from the Virgin mother, but from Christianity itself; that the Virgin is not its originator, but its first beneficiary, and that the privilege claimed for her is a privilege, not only for all women, but for all men, in the life of the new age. And if we pass to that remarkable ordination sermon in which our Lord upholds to his disciples the principles of his kingdom, we shall find the same message and the same moral. The Sermon on the Mount opens with a series of beatitudes. The things which it blesses are all feminine qualities. The originality, however, is not in the quality, but in the blessing. You may easily produce from the Talmud, from the Stoic, from the records of the East, precepts which express the individual praise of virtues such as these. But it is one thing for the individual to *praise*, it is another for him to predict. A stray man in a sensuous age may say: "I admire poverty of spirit, meekness, mercy, peacemaking;" but he will be no common man if under these circumstances he can say: "The time is coming when these virtues will be the rage." I may love a thing which is down-trodden, and even by reason of its down-troddenness; but to predict for it at that time the kingdom, the power, and the glory—that is a great thing. It is here that to my mind lies the originality of the beatitudes. It is not that Christ eulogizes the passive or feminine qualities; it is that he claims for them an empire in the present system of things. Even the later Isaiah, piercing as was his eye, had hardly seen that. It was not to the

present system of things that he looked for the apotheosis of the feminine ideal. It was from the grave of time that the man who should pour out His soul unto death was to arise and divide the spoil; in the order of the present world he must ever be the "despised and rejected of men." But to the Son of Man the empire of the feminine ideal is to be *in* time. So sure is it to him, so connected to his mind is it with the present environment, that he speaks of it as even now in the air—"theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven." The virtues of the mount had always been blessed by *God*; the originality of Christ's teaching is his declaration that they shall be blessed by man. The peacemakers had always *been* God's children; but Christ says a time is coming when they shall be *called* God's children. It is the *reputation* that is here the beatitude, and it is the beatitude that is here the novelty.

I shall hope in my next paper to exhibit in more detail the nature of this new ideal. In the meantime I should like to point out that it opens up to the apologist a fresh field of evidence. It gives a new meaning to prophecy. The time was when it was counted a great thing to predict a historical event—to tell the date of a coming catastrophe, or to announce the name of a man who was not yet born. I know a more sure word of prophecy, and also a more excellent way. It may be something to tell that a king shall arise two hundred years hence who shall be called Cyrus. But to stand in the streets of a sensuous city, to walk in the midst of a community devoted to physical force, and to predict that the day shall dawn when the things crowned amongst these men shall be poverty of spirit, mercy, and meekness—this is the very acme of prophetic power. The survival of the fittest is a grand law; but who shall predict the forms that shall be fitted to survive? Nothing is naturally more unlikely than that the meek should inherit the earth. Doubtless they survive by reason of their strength; but they were once vanquished by reason of their weakness. The eye that could forecast the years "to find in loss a gain to match," the hand that could stretch through time "to catch the far-off interest of tears," must be an eye and a hand above the measure of a man.